REPORT OF THE WORKING GROUP TO STUDY MULTIDISTRICT ONLINE LEARNING OPTIONS IN MAINE

February 22, 2013

Sen. Millett, Rep. MacDonald, members of the Joint Standing Committee on Education and Cultural Affairs,

Pursuant to LD 675, I hereby report to you on the work of the Working Group to Study Multidistrict Online Learning Options in Maine. The working group was formed last fall, has met twice in person, and has made extensive use of online meeting space to undertake some of its consideration of issues related to digital and online learning.

The Charge to the Working Group

The working group was given the broad task of studying "the opportunities and challenges presented by establishing multidistrict online learning options for students enrolled in kindergarten to grade 12 public schools in the State" and reporting its findings to the Committee. LD 675, as it was originally brought before the Committee in the last legislative session, would have established a process whereby students in Maine school could access online learning opportunities in school administrative units outside their own resident school unit. The Committee determined, after consideration of the bill, that more work on the broad issue of online learning was needed, and converted the bill into a Resolve creating the Working Group.

Identification of Key Issues

Once formed, the Working Group met for the first time on August 22, 2012. At that meeting, the Working Group organized its work into four broad policy areas, based on what it felt to be the key issues that needed further exploration. They are as follows:

Key Principle	Goal
Equity	Consistent with existing state policy as it regards the MLTI one-to-one program, the state's goal should be to ensure equitable access to online and digital learning opportunities, including access for students with disabilities.
Quality Control	Every effort should be made to ensure that online and digital leaning opportunities are of high quality and aligned with Maine's *Learning Results* standards, which include the Common Core standards in Math and English Language Arts.
Professional Development and Support for Educators	Proper implementation of online and digital learning opportunities requires that Maine's teachers and school leaders be provided with

	professional development and support on best practices for digital learning integration.
Customized learning	Online and digital learning opportunities that are in use should be indexed or cataloged in such a way as to facilitate their use by other Maine educators to meet the individual learning needs of students.

Putting forward policy recommendations in these areas also required the Working Group to consider how its recommendations might be funded, and as part of that discussion, to consider the potential role of the state in advancing the Working Group's recommendations.

The challenge to the group, therefore, was to find a way for Maine to expand access to high quality digital and online learning options, provide additional training for educators on how to best use those resources to meet the needs of learners, and organize those learning options in such a way that they could be readily deployed to meet specific learning objectives for individual learners.

Clarifying meanings

One of the first challenges to the group was to clarify what was meant by digital and online learning. Discussion on that point led to a consensus finding that digital learning meant everything from individual pieces of digital content, such a videos and applications that might lend themselves to a blended learning approach, to full, self-contained digital courses that students and teachers might take with a high degree of independence. The Working Group believed that high quality digital content of all kinds should be made more readily available.

Defining Challenges

The challenges confronting the Working Group were daunting. There is little available data on the kinds of online and digital resources being used in Maine schools today, and even less data regarding its quality. Digital learning options vary dramatically from school to school and from district to district, with the state playing very little role in its vetting, acquisition, or use. Digital learning providers are given the opportunity to apply for inclusion on the Department's "approved provider" list, but because districts are free to purchase or access online and digital content from non-approved providers, the presence of the approved providers list has had little definable impact on the quality of content being used. With regard to funding expanded access to digital learning options, the continuing economic downturn has made fewer resources available to schools, districts, or the state, whether for digital learning or for anything else. Expanding access to high quality digital learning options will almost certainly have to be done within existing resources.

What the working group thus found itself trying to develop was a way to do the following:

- Identify the digital learning tools now in use in Maine schools, establish their quality and more fully understand how they are used.
- Develop a means to expand access to these and other digital learning options, both for students and for educators, while maintaining a high degree of quality control.

- Develop a way to index these digital learning options to standards and other learning outcomes, in order to facilitate their use for personalized learning.
- Provide more equitable access to these resources by students and educators across Maine, despite budgetary pressures at all levels, including at the state level.

A Digital Learning Strategy

Once the challenges were outlined, the group took advantage of online meeting space to continue discussion of these issues, and at the Working Group's most recent meeting, on November 21, 2012, the group discussed specific ways to meet the challenges outlined above. Over the course of these discussions, both in subgroups and later in the full group, common themes were identified and from them a concept began to emerge that might meet the broad needs established by the Working Group. This concept might be broadly described as a curated digital learning directory.

The concept of the digital learning directory is relatively simple. The state would develop and maintain an online directory of digital learning options. Each option added to the directory, either by the state or, ideally, by the user, would be "tagged" against certain indicators, including the type of resource (online course, video, application, and so on), its content area and grade level, and the most applicable Maine *Learning Results* standard to which the option might be tied. The directory would also include a means whereby these digital learning objects could be reviewed for quality and utility, in much the same way Amazon.com and other websites allow users to review products.

In this way, a middle school teacher seeking a digital learning resource for use in a math course related to a specific Maine *Learning Results* standard could visit the directory website and search for digital content by standard, grade level, content area or a combination of these and be provided with a list of resources, complete with reviews by other users. This same tool could be used for all digital content, from 10-minute videos on a single math concept to a complete online course.

This same construct could be used for teacher professional development. Professional development opportunities, whether a presentation at a conference or an entire online course, could be placed in the directory, allowing teachers and administrators to review them to see if they meet targeted professional development needs. Because the state is in the process of developing a common set of standards for teacher and leader effectiveness, these resources could be indexed to specific teaching and leadership standards and practices, providing educators with more targeted resources for professional development. Indeed, it was not lost on the panel that one of the primary uses of the directory might be to help provide educators with additional professional development resources related to digital learning itself.

An added benefit of the directory would be the information the state would be able to gather on usage. As noted above, outside the MLTI program, the state collects little or no data on the digital learning resources districts are using. By having users note *how* resources are being used when they are added to the directory, the state can gather data that might better inform the state's support for digital learning.

As for how the directory would expand access to actual digital learning options as opposed to expanding access to information about these resources, the Task Force discussed a couple of different approaches. First, the Working Group acknowledged that a high and growing percentage of high quality digital content is available at no cost. In fact, one of the benefits of the directory would be its ability to connect educators to free or low-cost digital learning options about which they might not otherwise know. Second, the usage data the directory would collect could help drive state investment in digital learning. The state might be able to identify the most commonly used "premium" content—digital content districts pay to access—and then be able to use the state's purchasing power to negotiate statewide access at lower rates. This approach would address one issue the state confronts as policymakers consider whether to start a state-run virtual school, as Florida has done, or undertake state purchase of digital content, which is a lack of full understanding with regard to what digital learning resources Maine's students and educators want and need.

The Working Group also discussed the possibility of the directory having an "exchange" capacity that might allow districts to swap digital resources with each other, and might one day contain an "account" function, whereby the state could fund accounts for districts (and districts could, in turn, fund accounts for teachers or students), allowing users access to targeted funding for approved digital content.

Though the Department's "Online Community of Practice" website could form the basis for the online directory described above (and plans are underway to add that functionality), the directory concept needs further refinement, and a detailed implementation plan needs to be developed. The directory model, the Working Group feels, would address many of the issues the Group confronted. The directory, were it to be fully implemented and used, would give us good data on the usage of digital content, would serve as a quality control mechanism, would provide expanded access to free and low-cost digital resources, and would produce data and information that could drive further state investment in digital learning. The directory structure could be used not only for digital content to be used by students, but for digital content to be deployed by teachers in a blended learning environment and for professional development resources to be used by educators themselves. In this way, one basic tool could address a number of major needs.

<u>Where we are now</u>

Online content being provided by the state:

The AP4ALL program currently offers 13 different online AP courses including two sections each of AP Computer Science, AP English, AP Psychology, and AP Government. Course offerings for next year will likely increase based on surveys completed by each of Maine's high schools. Last year's surveys led to the addition of AP Computer Science, AP Chemistry, AP Macroeconomics, AP Microecomonics, AP World History, and AP Art History. Nearly 200 students from across the State are engaged in these rigorous online courses at no cost to the school.

The "Online Community of Practice" website.

The Department's online communities of practice site, Mainelearning.net, which the Department has been piloting for about a year, was established as a way to allow Maine's educators to share resources online. The Department is currently developing plans to make the site more sustainable, and will be issuing an RFP this spring to expand and develop the digital content directory functionality, in response to the thinking of the Working Group. The Department sees the site as being the foundational platform on which the digital directory can be built.

Online textbook tool

The Department is also developing an online textbook tool that will allow teachers to stitch together digital content into cohesive lessons or courses. This online environment is based on work developed over the past three years of Federal Title IID Enhancing Education Through Technology grants. The new system will include a federated search across both Maine's directory as well as other common Open Educational Resources repositories of free and open content.

The MLTI one-to-one initiative

The Maine Learning Technology Initiative released its Request for Proposals in late November seeking the next generation of the 1:1 program. The Request for Proposal added a multi-state aspect that will allow other states to leverage the resulting contract. The Department has been working closely with the state departments of education from Hawaii and Vermont in the creation of the multi-state cooperative. The Department anticipates that awards for the RFP will be made in coming weeks and will provide opportunities for all schools at all grade levels in Maine.

Next Steps

Though work is underway to expand access to digital learning opportunities, more work needs to be done.

The **Maine Department of Education** needs to continue the work it is doing to further pilot the Online Community of Practice website and to expand offerings like AP4All. The awarding of the RFP for the next round of the MLTI one-to-one computing initiative may also result in additional digital learning opportunities.

The **Working Group to Study Multidistrict Online Learning Options in Maine** will continue to meet, both online and in person, in order to continue developing the digital directory concept and to explore additional approaches to improve digital learning in Maine, especially as it regards professional development and training for Maine's educators, which emerged as a core priority for

the group. Specifically, the group is particularly interested in connecting with the state's educator preparation programs to more fully discuss pre-service and in-service training for educators related to digital learning.

The **Maine Charter School Commission**, which has the authority under state statute to authorize virtual charter schools, agreed at a recent meeting to have a subgroup of the Commission more fully explore the issues of virtual charter schools and propose next steps for the Commission, including the possible development of a "virtual-only" request for charter school proposals.

If the recently released bill title list is any indication, the **Maine Legislature** will take up the issue of digital learning as well, as a number of legislators plan to submit digital learning bills in this coming legislative session. The Committee will obviously hear any bills related to digital learning, and will therefore be instrumental to the development of Maine's digital learning policies.

As these efforts continue, the Department will continue to keep the Committee apprised of further developments.

Conclusion

Digital learning is a complex issue, but the Working Group has made great headway in identifying key issues for policymakers to consider. The Group will continue to explore the concept of a digital learning directory and marketplace, and will continue to offer recommendations that they believe will improve access to high quality digital learning opportunities for all students.